

The background of the cover is a medieval manuscript illustration. It depicts a landscape viewed through a rectangular opening, possibly a window or a niche in a stone wall. The landscape features a body of water in the foreground, a rocky shore, and a distant city with a prominent obelisk. The sky is a pale blue. The illustration is rendered in a style typical of medieval manuscript art, with visible brushstrokes and a limited color palette.

AFRICAN LANDINGS

Egypt and Sinai as Seen by Medieval European
and Arab Travellers (4th–15th) Centuries)

BEATRICE BORGHI



AFRICAN LANDINGS

‘African Landings makes a valuable contribution to medieval Mediterranean studies by presenting Italian travel diaries and records often unfamiliar to the Anglophone world. Through its analysis of these unique perspectives, the book offers fresh insights into the cultural exchanges that shaped both Eastern and Western histories’.

Marina Montesano, *University of Messina, Italy*

This book seeks to break free from Eurocentric historical perspectives of medieval-era travel through Egypt and Sinai by focusing on the testimonies of 4th- to 15th-century travellers from the African continent, especially pilgrim diaries from the Arab Muslim Egyptian world.

Humanity’s past is the story of movements by peoples who reshaped and redefined their identity and reported their impressions to a gradually diversified public–migratory currents that transported not just goods but ideas, intellect, culture and inventions. Focusing on Egypt in the Middle Ages—its cities, its suburbs and hinterland, and the many faces of its landscape—can provide us with answers to topical issues, as well as a new and better understanding of Levantine Mediterranean history. These diaries tell of objects, calendars, written works and artworks, sculptures, frescoes, monuments, musical instruments, animals, foodstuffs, and finally, of material and immaterial heritages—all valuable sources for understanding world history and posing questions about their, and our own, preconceptions.

This volume will be of interest to students, scholars, and general readers of medieval history, Mediterranean history, travel history, and religious history.

Beatrice Borghi is Associate Professor of Medieval History at the Department of Education, University of Bologna. Her research concerns the field of pilgrimage and its manifestations in the three monotheistic religions and the study of medieval statutes.



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INTRODUCTION

The reasons behind a choice

This book sets out to delve into the imagery of the Mediterranean by laying bare the deep structure of the Egyptian world in the medieval period – so called for reasons of western periodisation. This quest for the latent reality of the Mediterranean worlds will involve weighing the feelings that made what happened in that millennium possible, going beyond the myths, while never losing sight of them, drawing tangible material evidence from people's fantasy. For that is the exciting literary dimension in which travellers move; and let us reiterate: travel diaries are extraordinary narrative sources for investigating the cultural and social contexts of what for centuries has been categorised as 'other'. It is now generally accepted that if one wishes to grasp the profound meaning of any fact occurring in the past, one must make use of all available sources, sifting documents, memoirs, chronicles, literature and images alike, without distinction. We may state with conviction that diary and chronicle studies offer insights into the past on a par with documentary sources, a fact that may still need spelling out, though it should by now go without saying.

Often the spirit of the times, the view of society anywhere in the world and its inevitable ideological and psychological implications would not be so readable or clear without those literary works that are the main tools depicting a period. Tools that paint our own history in return, in narrating aspects of private life and imaginative reality.

Reading these literary genres makes us realise that the past-present dialectic translates into questioning our social order, which is increasingly characterised by the co-presence here and now of different cultural subjects, each steeped in collective identity and memories.

As for the category 'other', we still tend to think of civilisations (European, Western, Eastern, Islamic, Chinese, Asian, etc.) as natural type descriptions.

But we are not talking about objects that really exist, with well-defined properties. Civilisations are dynamic and never static: they are social and cultural constructs.

Edward Said demonstrated this when reconstructing how the category of East came into being in opposition to that of West. The tendency is to think of the Oriental tradition as a specific genre opposed to that of the West. But, as we know, the image of the Orient – cruel, magical, despotic, sensual – is a stereotype, a pure 19th-century Western invention, serving to justify the imperialist and colonialist ideology of the great European states.

The categories of ‘East’ and ‘West’ are empty containers in which everything that does not fit into ‘East’/‘West’ is collected.¹

How can we think of lumping Egypt, China, Japan, the Jews, the Arabs, the Persians and Indians together as if they were the same dimension? Clearly, the same applies to the opposite (stereo)types: these are cultural structures whose content varies according to period and context. The immediate consequence is a binary way of thinking: ‘us’ and ‘them’ – just as the very concept of ‘tradition’ stands confirmed as a social construction, something that *we* create.

These basic assumptions lie behind the book’s analysis of the sources proposed; it aims to give the reader the chance, which is also a responsibility, to ponder fragments of our past as a kind of intercultural fresco, helping us to avoid endlessly repeating the concepts of ‘us’, ‘them’ and ‘others’.

The starting point – the question, if you like – of the research is the present. To recall the stories of ancient times and compare them with the present day is to grasp the *emotion* of history, transcending the apparent dryness of texts to thumb through and dates and events to remember. Observing everyday events around the Mediterranean today presents a rather different picture from what happened in the more distant past, as is to be expected; but it does seem that those distant memories of the cultures of the *medias terras* have been forgotten or clouded by today’s societies. From our present perspective, the question we must ask ourselves is: what is the *relevance* of those medieval stories of exchanges and migrations around the ‘lands amidst’ the *liquid continent* – particularly Africa – to a present day that seems to have shrouded in oblivion the very records that produced them?

Through theme paths and gradual focusing, the book will try to recapture the viewpoint of those who travelled to Egypt and Sinai and left us travel diaries, especially pilgrim diaries, for of such accounts is history also made: humanity’s past is the story of movements by peoples who reshaped and redefined their identity, and reported their impressions to a gradually diversified public – a story of migratory currents that transported not just goods but ideas, intellect, culture and inventions. So the question we posed earlier is our guiding thread as we attempt to conjure up a past² that is bound forcibly to occupy the centre of our future.

In its approach, the book follows the long-term historical framework proposed by Fernand Braudel in his masterly study of the Mediterranean world. For, as José Enrique Ruiz-Domènec recently phrased it, ‘all civilisations rest on a latent

structure which, in sustaining them, imbues them with reason'. Georges Duby argued the need to imagine the interstices of life, in that sources only offer clues 'since revealing the image-store of society is the main motivation behind the historian's profession [...] narration of the past has no meaning if it fails to bring to light the unknown parts of the story being told'.³

It is my belief that a focus on Egypt in the period known as the 'Middle Ages', on its cities, its suburbs and hinterland, and the many faces of its landscape, can provide us with answers to topical issues, as well as providing a new and better understanding of Levantine Mediterranean history. For this reason, the topics proposed will be based on a methodological approach that is faithful to the way knowledge is handed down and the meaning and purpose we attach to the compiling of history.

It is clear that we are living through a crucial and particularly delicate period in history on which the very future of humanity may depend. No one can ignore the marked signs of climate change, the growing shortfall of resources, the disquieting general instability, the problems of population growth, the increase in pollution, the depletion of many raw materials, and the areas of unsolved conflict underscoring the dramatic nature of these issues. The debate on future prospects and the need for countermeasures divides those who play down the adverse symptoms, claiming that technology will always find a way, from those who sound the alarm, warning that any decisions we now take on development will be decisive and irreversible. There is, however, a growing general awareness that such far-reaching issues affect the entire human race and must be addressed in a global manner, if we are to understand how we came to our present pass.

To judge by how it started and developed, *globalisation* appears to be the outcome of a process stretching back tens of thousands of years, ever since the earliest movements of the first human communities in their constant search for resources.⁴

We have all inhabited the same perilous space of the Mediterranean, equipped with the same nautical instruments and the same astronomical knowledge, none of which have safeguarded against the perils of the waves. The history of those voyages and encounters has been a common one for millennia, setting its own rhythm to progress.⁵

Today more than ever, we need to start again from this common history, made up of shipwrecks as well as landings; our task is to weave a new narrative of lands and seas through a global approach to historical knowledge. Setting sail from the African shore and projecting ourselves onto a Mediterranean scale means rethinking relations and broadening the perspective to allow for complexity, and from that point projecting ourselves onto a dimension closer to current issues.

The story the book proposes is the thrilling tale of worlds alternating in time and space, in which we start with a question: how did the variegated humanity that populated the lands of Egypt reason in terms of time (the importance of ordering the 'time-line' and making sense of history), space and 'otherness'? A question that

poses at least two others: what written description did those social groups leave of their different Mediterranean frescoes and, finally, how do those accounts manage to capture so many different voices and forms? An extremely ambitious undertaking, I fully recognise.

History is knowledge, serving to make us think, reflect, choose wittingly and responsibly; knowledge of human potential in an open canvas, not one that is hemmed within our collective idea of events. In short, the book tries to suggest another history of that world of towns in the African continent; striving to break free from the Eurocentric perspective, it favours the viewpoint of non-European societies – in our case the Arab Muslim Egyptian world, long invisible in Western historiography – and does so by comparing different descriptions of the same cities in the two continents of Africa and Asia. In conclusion, it tries to re-tell history by breaking free from our cosy intellectual routines, shifting our decentralising efforts and proposing a diachronic mixture of global history. Perhaps in the process our set view of Europe (always so central in world historiography) will emerge in a temporal and spatial dimension that is not so omnipresent and omniscient but part of a narrative process where humanity *as a whole* has contributed its stories to global history.

The travel diaries, many of them pilgrims' diaries, show us ethnographic aspects involving a great diversity of actors; they tell of objects, calendars, written works and artworks, sculptures, frescoes, monuments, musical instruments, animals, foodstuffs, and finally, about material and immaterial heritages: all valuable sources for understanding world history and posing questions about their, and our own, preconceptions.

Diary accounts are literary sources of considerable historical importance, which may tell us subjective stories but are unquestionably stories of genuine travel. Such accounts are not animated by wars of conquest, rather they are a medley of experiences: pilgrimages, journeys of pleasure and curiosity, sometimes about exchange of goods. Perhaps for that reason they are more objective than others in that they have a background of nomadism. They are stories of cooperation more than armed conflict. Human history has long appeared as a history of battles, the encounter with the 'other' being presented as a history of conflict. It is as if war were the only time when (sedentary) chroniclers mention nomadic (other) peoples. In this awareness, the book comparatively analyses the diaries of travellers to Egypt from the perspective of nomadism. We hear the voices of migrants, and such nomadism (western and eastern) shaped reality – understanding which, we understand today. It is a history, in short, marked by places and not events.

Today's world can be seen as a large showcase of the past, to which all existences, all events and all phenomena that have occurred over time have contributed in varying degrees. Among them, many remain hidden, unseen, cancelled by neglect or by adverse will and outcome. Not all that happened leaves a trace, but only what remained in the foreground, according to a selection that discarded the fate

of the defeated, the marginalised, the forgotten of history. Yet every event, every presence has altered the previous situation, albeit minimally, and in any case the present contains tangible signs of humanity's past. Since current situations, issues, problems and perspectives are the result, historical knowledge can contribute to a better understanding of ourselves as individuals and as communities, and serve to plan for the future in accordance with the warnings of the past.

In this light, the study of history (medieval and otherwise) proves concretely useful; it can stimulate interest and curiosity, and prompt active participation in the learning process.⁶

Notes

- 1 Edward W. Said, *Orientalismo. L'immagine europea dell'Oriente* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2013). The basic thesis of Said's volume is that 'Orient' is a Western creation and that most Western studies on the peoples and culture of the East have served as self-assertion of European identity.
- 2 Tony Judt, *L'età dell'oblio. Sulle rimozioni del '900* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2011).
- 3 José Enrique Ruiz-Domènec, *Il sogno di Ulisse. Storia umana del Mediterraneo dalla guerra di Troia all'emergenza degli sbarchi* (Segrate: Utet, 2023), p. 16.
- 4 Rolando Dondarini, *Quel tempo chiamato medioevo. Mille anni di vicende, trasformazioni e antefatti della nostra storia* (Napoli: Liguori, 2012), p. 3.
- 5 Predrag Matvejević, *Breviario mediterraneo* (Milano: Garzanti, 1991).
- 6 Borghi (ed.), *Luce sui secoli bui. Lo studio, l'insegnamento e l'apprendimento della storia medievale* (Bologna: Pàtron, 2017), especially chapters I, III.

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